Tourism's destination dominance and marketing website usefulness

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to propose and test empirically tourism's destination dominance and marketing website usefulness hypothesis (TDDH). The study proposes a multi-item metric for marketing website usefulness. The main hypothesis is that the usefulness of a destination's marketing website associates positively with the dominance of tourism in the destination.

Design/methodology/approach – The following ratio defines tourism's destination dominance: the number of tourists visiting annually to a destination's residential population. The method includes creating a multi-item metric for judging the usefulness of a destination's marketing website. The study applies the metric in evaluating the usefulness of 40 destination marketing websites.

Findings – The study's findings indicate a significant relationship between tourism destination dominance and marketing website usefulness. The effect size of this relationship is small. The small effect size indicates that some destinations with relatively few tourists (relative to the destination's residential population) do include substantial amounts of information in their websites and some destinations with relatively many tourists do not do so.

Research limitations/implications – The usefulness of a destination's website for potential visitors does not relate substantially to tourism's dominance in the destination. Some destinations with relatively few tourists are highly competent in designing websites that are highly useful for potential visitors.

Originality/value – Providing a discussion of alternative tourism destination dominance metrics, confirming the view that destination marketing websites vary in their usefulness for potential visitors and offering a metric for testing usefulness are the valuable contributions of the study.

Keywords Tourism, Marketing, Web sites

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Though the relationship between actual and perceived information usefulness of an e-tourism website is unlikely to be extremely high, the study in this report builds from the assumption the depth and breadth of actual information coverage of a commercial e-tourism website affects customers' evaluations of the website quality and their purchases using the website. The study presented here examines the proposition that

competing e-tourism websites differ substantially in their actual "content richness" (i.e. observable information depth and breadth; see Choi and Morrison, 2005; Law and Bai, 2008). The study explores the hypothesis that tourism destination dominance (i.e. number of tourists visiting a destination annually divided by the destination's year-round population) relates to the content richness of the destination's website. The findings support the view that e-tourism strategists need to provide highly content-rich website designs relative to their competitors' websites. Future research needs to study the unique and configural influences of actual versus perceived content richness, information usability, website customer "hold-ability" (i.e. effort – clicks, and time willing to spend at the site) and purchases at e-tourism sites.

Law and Bai (2008) offer evidence of the phenomenal growth on e-tourism sales growth. They cite McGann's (2004) prediction that the amount of US online travel booking revenues in 2009 would reach $US91 billion, and this represents 33 percent of total US travel revenues, up from $US46 billion and 20 percent in 2003. IMEDIA Connection (2010) estimates 2009 US online travel-related sales to be $US122 billion, up from $US52 billion in 2004.

> Travel is one of the most mature B2C ecommerce categories, as measured by the percent of total industry sales generated online. By 2010, Forrester predicts that about 46 percent of total travel sales will be booked online, second only to computer hardware/software (55 percent) (IMEDIA Connection, 2010, p. 1).

Law *et al.* (2007, p. 495) provide compelling evidence as to one of the reasons for the dramatic rise in e-tourism:

> Empirical findings showed the web sites of local travel agents and local reservation agents offered the lowest online room rates, and that indirect distribution channels offered lower room rates than direct distribution channels.

The tourism and hospitality industries have widely adopted information technology (IT) to reduce costs, enhance operational efficiency, and most importantly to improve service quality and customer experience (Law *et al.*, 2009). In particular, the internet has become one of the most important sources of consumer information (Zins, 2007), especially for young and better educated consumers (Beritelli *et al.*, 2007; Casanova *et al.*, 2005; Seabra *et al.*, 2007). Consumers use IT extensively to evaluate alternative travel opportunities and for comparing and contrasting offerings (Buhalis and O'Connor, 2005).

Generally speaking, there are two mainstreams on researching website quality:

(1) content richness; and

(2) ease of use (Law and Bai, 2008).

Lu and Yeung (1998) initially classified the quality and usefulness of a website to comprise functionality and usability, but no further explanations of these terms were provided.

Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) point out that according to a Travel Industry Association (2005) report, search engine websites are increasingly the first place consumers go in their travel planning process:

Information search strategies on the Web may differ according to the type of search (whether or not it is goal oriented; Jang, 2004). That is, goal-oriented information searchers who need specific information (e.g., maps and driving directions; price, availability of flights, and accommodations; calendar of local events; or deals) are more inclined to rely on a search engine (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008, p. 4).

Growing numbers of customers now purchase tourism products through websites, and perceive that a website's image and usability directly affects their purchase intentions (Chiang and Jang, 2006; Law and Cheung, 2006; Law and Hsu, 2006). Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie (2006) predicted that by 2015, the majority of consumers will purchase holidays through the internet, and that the digital society will change their purchase behavior. Moreover, location-based information and services are not only convenient for tourists, but can also be made available for residents to enhance local cohesion, and support the interactivity between the community and the industry (Edwards *et al.*, 2006).

According to Law *et al.* (2010), academic researchers have long ago advocated the importance of assessing website effectiveness. Many frameworks for evaluating website performance have been proposed; however, as a newly emerging area, website evaluation as yet has no globally accepted definition.

Given the actual and increasing importance of this topic for contemporary hospitality management, the present article examines two basic issues. First, do destinations that may compete for visitors differ substantially in the basic information that their destination management organizations (DMOs) include in their official tourism websites? Second, if these websites do differ substantially in the quality and quantity of information that they provide, do such differences associate with relative tourism's dominance on the destinations? Tourism destination dominance (TDD) is tourism activity relative to all activity in a destination geographic area; very high TDD indicates that tourism represents the most frequently occurring activity in a destination area.

The present article includes alternative theories of associations of tourism's destination dominance and quality and quantity of information. An exploratory empirical study probes the theory. The findings support an asymmetric relationship between tourism's destination dominance and the quality and quantity of information in destination websites: high dominance is sufficient but not necessary for high quality and quantity of information.

Following this brief introduction, Section 2 presents alternative theories of tourism destination dominance and quality-quantity of information. Section 3 describes a method for testing the relative efficacy of the competing theories. Section 4 presents the findings from an empirical study using the method. Section 5 offers conclusions, limitations, and implications for future research and DMO strategies to attract visitors via designing website communications.

2. Tourism destination dominance and website information
The first sub-section provides a discussion about alternative metrics for measuring tourism destination dominance and metrics of an additional antecedent (DMO competency) that is likely to influence the quality and quantity of website information.

The second sub-section describes alternative theories of antecedent influences on the quality and quantity of website information.

2.1 Tourism destination dominance metric
A simple population-based metric for estimating TDD is the number of tourists relative to the number of residents. Equation (1) is a formal statement of this metric:

$$TDD_1 = tourists_n/residents_n. \tag{1}$$

Here $tourists_n$ is the annual number of tourists and $residents_n$ is the the current number of residents.

Equations (2)-(5) are alternative metrics for TDD. Equation (2) is a relative economic impact metric of TDD that uses total tourism direct (and possibly indirect) retail expenditures in the destination area relative to total direct (and possibly indirect) retail expenditures in the area. Equation (3) is tourism receipts per capita of a destination's population relative to total receipts per capita of the destination's population. Equation (4) is a destination's tourism income relative to the gross domestic production (GDP) for a destination area. Equation (5) is an equal-weights average of the values of equations (1)-(5).

$$TDD_2 = \text{destination retail expenditures by tourists}/ \\ \text{total destination retail expenditures}, \tag{2}$$

$$TDD_3 = \text{tourism receipts per capita/total receipts per capita}, \tag{3}$$

$$TDD_4 = \text{destination tourism income/destination GDP}, \tag{4}$$

$$TDD_5 = \text{Equal weights metric} = [(1) + (2) + (3) + (4)]/4. \tag{5}$$

At the country level, tourists include non-domestic tourists' annual arrivals, with the same person being counted one or more times depending on the number of separate trips to the country that each non-resident completes annually. At a region, city, or district level, tourists include both domestic but not local residents and foreign non-residents visiting the area, with the same person being counted one or more times depending on the number of separate trips to the area that non-residents to the area complete annually.

Because the values for TDD_1 range from 0 to 100 + while the other TDD_i range from 0 to 1, the raw values of estimates for all TDD metrics can be calibrated to fuzzy-set scales (Ragin, 2008) that range from 0 to 1.00 to eliminate the misleading influence of a few extreme values when computing TDD_1 or TDD_5. For an example of such calibration work in a tourism context, see Woodside (2010).

Typically a TDD-metric score increases as the focus shifts from nation to region to city to district. For example, the TDD_1 score for France equals 1.3 but equals 6.7 for Paris. This TDD_1 for Paris includes only total foreign visitors (14.8 million foreign tourists) in the numerator and 2.2 Parisian residents in the denominator. Including both French visitors to Paris and foreign visitors to Paris, TDD_1 for Paris increases to 50.0.

Consequently, the importance of tourism varies substantially more for districts and cities than by regions and countries. Thus, a country or region may continue to thrive without tourists while some of its cities or districts in cities die if tourists fail to arrive.

Researchers, DMO executives, and destination residents may consider applying different weights rather than equal weights to TDD, including discarding one or more terms in equation (5) (i.e. assigning a weight equal to 0 to a particular TDD metric). A configuration of a low TDD_1 (e.g. $TDD_1 < 1.0$) and high TDD_3 ($TDD_3 > 10$) represents few tourists relative to a destination's residential population but very high tourists' destination expenditures relative total expenditures in the destination area. The argument might be made that a TDD_1/TDD_3 ratio below 0.5 is an ideal situation, while a $TDD_1/TDD_3 > 5.0$ might represent an abusive TDD situation – many tourists spend relatively few dollars, euros, or other currency.

The discussion of TDD metrics is valuable for regional economic planning, because tourism sometimes collapses – tourism disappears following natural disasters or political revolutions, for example. Attempting to nurture extremely high TDD scores (e.g. $TDD_i > 20$) may be unwise at a regional or city level for all TDD metrics. Planning and implementing strategies to respond to negative views about having "too many tourists" or an over-reliance on tourists for a destination's economic well-being are likely to benefit from accurate estimates and interpretations of scores for different TDD_i metrics.

Two important additional propositions about TDD metrics are worth mentioning. First, TDD metrics usually associate positively with each other. A destination with a high TDD_1 score is also likely to have high TDD_2, TDD_3, and TDD_4 scores relative, and vice versa. For example, St Mortiz, Switzerland, has scores higher than Cleveland, Ohio (USA), on all TDD_i metrics. Second, not all destinations will fit into such a pattern of all high or all low scores across all TDD_i; some notable exceptions occur infrequently, but they do occur. For example, a few destinations are likely to have substantial differences in TDD_1 and TDD_3 ratios.

DMO competency is a second antecedent condition that likely influences the quality and quantity of information in official tourism destination websites. This hypothesis assumes that DMOs do not perform equally well in planning, implementing, and evaluating tourism management strategies. The evidence in available literature supports this assumption (Woodside and Sakai, 2001, 2009).

Thus, senior executives of different DMOs are likely to vary in:

- their beliefs as to whether or not the official tourism destination website plays a critical role in attracting visitors and increasing visitors' expenditures while visiting the destination; and

- their abilities to implement effective strategies, resulting in destination websites that are high in quality and quantity of information.

Woodside and Sakai (2001, 2009) provide metrics for measuring DMO competency. The study in the present article examines the impact of DMO competency only theoretically; future research is necessary to examine DMO competency influence empirically.

2.2 Alternative theories of antecedent influences on the quality and quantity of website information

In a thought experiment with data from 12 destinations, Figure 1 shows three alternative theories to the null hypothesis of a rectangular distribution of TDD influence on website information usefulness. Figure 1a illustrates a symmetrical relationship that indicates that high TDD is both sufficient and necessary for causing high website information usefulness. Given the pervasive empirical findings on relationships in the behavioral sciences that no one antecedent condition is necessary in causing an outcome condition (Ragin, 2008), this hypothesis (*H1*) is unlikely to receive empirical support.

H1. Increasing TDD causes DMOs to increase quality and quantity of information in destination websites.

The rationale for *H1* is as follows: a high TDD score indicates the tourism has great importance for achieving high economic well-being for a destination and the destination's DMO should therefore implement marketing activities to maintain and increase tourism visitors, including providing tourists with high-quality bountiful information at the official destination website. Moreover, it is likely that high TDD destinations count with higher budget for marketing purposes.

Figure 1b illustrates an asymmetrical relationship that indicates that high TDD is sufficient but not necessary for causing high website information usefulness.

H2. High TDD is sufficient but not necessary in causing high website information usefulness (WIU).

The rationale for *H2* is as follows: multiple routes to a high outcome condition (e.g. high website information usefulness) usually occur empirically in behavioral research (Ragin, 2008). Some destinations with low TDD are likely to have highly effective DMO leaders who implement websites that contain highly useful information for tourists because of these leaders' convictions that website information usefulness is critical for causing increases in tourist numbers and expenditure.

Figure 1c illustrates an inverted "U" hypothesis for the relationship between TDD and WIU.

H3. Destinations both low and high in TDD have websites that are more useful for tourists than destinations with moderate TDD.

The rationale for *H3* is as follows:

- substantial numbers of destinations that are low in TDD act aggressively to increase their market shares of tourists and tourists' expenditures, including creating websites that are highly useful for tourists;
- DMOs of destinations with high TDD scores are highly likely to recognize that they need to act to nurture the continual flow of visits and cash from tourists; and
- the DMOs of destinations with moderate TDD scores are most likely to assume that tourism is one of a few important industries for a destination area and consequently are most likely to fail to see the connection between TDD and WIU.
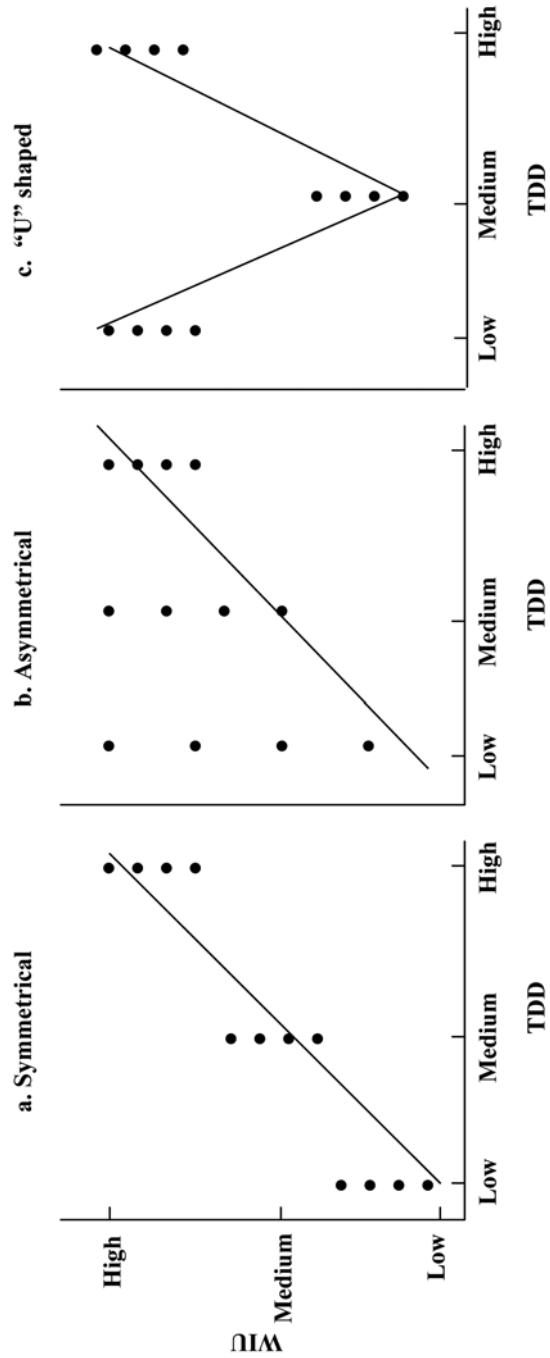
Figure 1.
Alternative theories of
tourism destination
dominance (TDD) and
destination website
information usefulness
(WIU)

3. Method
This exploratory empirical study of the three theories of TDD and WIU relationships examines four sets of three destination websites for quality and quantity of information usefulness. This section describes the metrics in the study and the methods of analysis.

3.1 Operational metrics
For simplicity, TDD_1 is the operational metric for estimating tourism destination dominance in the present study. However, future research would benefit likely by using two to four indicators of TDD rather than just one, even though the different TDD_i metrics associate positively with each other.

At the national level, TDD_1's numerator is number of foreign tourists' arrivals annually for the latest available year for the nation. TDD_1's denominator is the nation's total current population. Below the national level (i.e. at the regional, city, and district levels), TDD_1's numerator is the total tourist arrivals annually including both domestic and foreign tourists. The denominator is the area's (region, city, or district) current population.

Because this initial study examines four sets of comparisons of three competing destinations, the analysis includes transforming the three TDD_1 scores into low, medium, and high rather than usually original TDD_1 scores. This transformation permits examining the pattern of findings across the sets of competing destinations for national and city levels.

The analysis includes taking the equivalent steps for estimating relatively low, medium, and high levels of website information usefulness (WIU). Thus, the analysis permits answering the issue as to whether or not relatively high versus moderate or low scores on WIU relates to relatively high versus moderate and low scores on TDD_1.

The metric for website information usefulness includes 19 attributes. Table I summarizes the 19 attributes and compares the performances of one set of three competing destinations (Argentina, Brazil, and Chile). For example, note that Brazil offers information in its website in eight languages versus 2.5 languages for Chile, and three languages for Argentina.

The 19-item WIU evaluation template is not exhaustive; additional indicators are possible. The relevant key points here include the propositions that:

· creating such a WIU template (i.e., checklist) is possible; and

· competing destinations vary substantially in the website information usefulness that they provide to potential visitors.

The 19 items were selected by discussion of a ten-member research team; each team member was asked to examine travel destination websites independently before the team meeting and to bring a list of possible information attributes that tourists might seek at a destination website. The items were discussed and decisions were made at this planning meeting as to which items should be included in the evaluation instrument.

Information attribute	Brazil	Chile	Argentina	Best web
1. Hotel price per grades of rooms; booking at official website?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
2. Links to hotel booking?	Yes, by region	Yes, by region	List of travel agencies	Chile
3. Special events available in mid-July 2010?	Yes, very complete	Yes	Yes	Chile
4. Visit routes?	Yes	Very detailed	Yes	Chile
5. Free paper copy literature?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
6. Map of the destination?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unavailable
7. Booking for specific events?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
8. Information for visitors with young children?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
9. Interactive games?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
10. Information about health or police emergency?	Yes	Very detailed	Unavailable	Chile
11. Information for people with special needs?	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	Brazil
12. Special events calendar?	Yes, by region, theme and month	Yes, by region and month	Yes, by region, theme and month	Brazil
13. Weather information	In real time, but does not work	Main cities in real time	By month and region	Chile
14. Languages other than English?	Eight languages	English, Spanish, parts available in Chinese	English, Spanish, Portuguese	Brazil
15. Historical information?	Yes, very complete	Yes, very complete	General information	Brazil
16. Videos shown?	Photo and video gallery by city	Yes	Unavailable	Brazil
17. Safety/security information?	Unavailable	Very good	Unavailable	Chile
18. Visa requirements?	Consulate contacts	Very good	Unavailable	Chile
19. Comments and complaints	Contact form	Yes	Yes	Chile
20. Overall fuzzy-set score	Moderate	High	Low	Chile

Table I.
able 1 Example of metrics for website information usefulness

3.2 Procedure
Two judges working independently applied the WIU template for four sets of three competing destinations. The four sets of three competitors include the following destinations:

- Argentina, Brazil, and Chile;
- Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai;
- Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco; and
- Japan, Korea, Taiwan.

TDD_1 scores were calculated for each competitor and transformed by rankings into low, medium, and high scores relative to the competing set containing three destinations. For the first item in Table I, judges worked separately to attempt to find prices per grades of room and to learn whether they could book hotel rooms online at the official website for each destination. Each judge compared the three websites for answers to these questions. After recording the findings, each judge moved to the next item in the assessment and repeated the process. After completing these steps for all 19 items, the judges compared answers and resolved differences by returning to the websites as necessary for further discussion and to make a final conclusion. If the accuracy of an answer was still in doubt, the judges discussed the issue with a third, independent judge, and this judge's evaluation became the final answer for the item.

4. Findings
Figure 2 shows the findings from the analysis. The findings support initial evidence of an asymmetric or inverted-U relationship rather than a symmetric relationship between TDD_1 and WIU. Thus, findings support *H2* and *H3* rather than a symmetric relationship (*H1*). The competitor highest in TDD_1 are high in destination WIU while
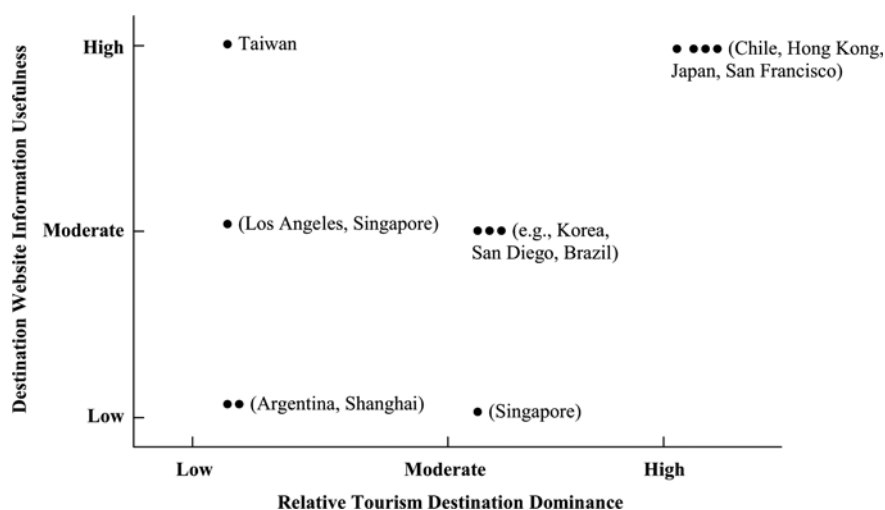

Figure 2.
Calibration of fuzzy set
scores for tourism
destination dominance
scores

all but one of competitors with relatively moderate to low TDD_1 are moderate to low in WIU.

Taiwan is the exception to this second finding. Taiwan is relatively low in TDD_1 in comparison to Japan and Korea but Taiwan scores relatively high in destination WIU.

The findings provide initial support for the belief that competitors with relatively modest TDD_1 are less likely than competitors with relatively high TDD_1 in WIU that they provide to visitors.

5. Conclusions, limitations, and implications

DMOs do appear to vary substantially in providing useful website information to potential visitors. Relatively simple metrics (e.g. number of languages available on the website) to complex metrics (see Table I) support this conclusion.

Empirical examination of the association between tourism destination dominance (TDD) and website information usefulness (WIU) does support the proposition that an asymmetric relationship exists. Competitors with relatively high TDD in comparison to their competitors TDD scores may have high WIU scores consistently.

The findings and conclusions are only suggestive because of the few comparisons made in this exploratory study. The findings are promising for both developing theory and for DMO early-warning performance evaluation.

The WIU template that this study includes may be useful for comparing website marketing performance among competing destinations. Given the high importance tourism management researchers and executives assign to e-marketing strategies (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008), applications of such WIU templates may serve as an early-warning metric for indicating poor, modest, or exceptionally high DMO performance.

The results of the empirical analysis indicate that high TDD is not a necessary condition for website usefulness. Hence, room exists for including additional antecedents as explanatory factors. Future research that includes additional indicators of DMO competency and the association of such indicators with WIU would likely be very informative. Woodside and Sakai (2001, 2009) provide a template that appears useful for measuring DMO competency in administering, sense-making, planning, implementing, and evaluating outcomes by DMOs. Future research efforts could include testing empirically the hypothesis that high versus low DMO competency relates to high levels of WIU.

A useful implication for the e-tourism strategist that follows from the present study is that strategies are more likely to be effective when designing the firm's e-tourism website high in content richness relative to its competitors' websites. Competing websites are expected to vary substantially in their information usefulness and content richness. Competing e-tourism websites are likely to vary substantially in their information usability and customer hold-ability. All three factors are likely to act together (i.e. in a causal recipe) in influencing customer purchases at the website. While e-tourism is now a major part of the travel and tourism industry, its relative importance is still growing and calls for vigilance and vision in designing effective e-tourism websites.

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